

Changing Seasons Part II: People of the Guardian

By Timothy Zahn

With a final salute through the canopy of his scout ship cockpit, Task Force Commander Fivvic lifted off the ground, the rest of the survey team close behind. Standing outside the Swens family barn where he'd spent the past four days, Obi-Wan Kenobi watched the ships disappear into the Dagro sky, wondering if this might possibly not be the smartest decision he'd made this month.

Beside him, Anakin Skywalker stirred. "It's not too late to call them back," he pointed out.

Obi-Wan took a deep breath. Smart or not, it was what they had to do. "Yes, it is," he said firmly.

"Good." Anakin turned to face east, holding a hand up to shield his eyes from the early morning sun. "So they're in there, huh?"

Obi-Wan turned, too. Cutting across the vast expanse of farmland in the near distance was a line of tall, gray cliffs. A kilometer or so south of where they stood, a raging white-water river boiled out of a narrow gorge in the cliff face, the turbulence subsiding as the water spread out into a wider riverbed and turned toward the north. "So it would seem," he told Anakin. "The trick's going to be getting in there with them."

"Flying in is definitely out," Anakin mused. "They'll be expecting that, and a gorge that narrow doesn't leave much maneuvering room. Could we rappel down from the top of the cliff?"

"That would be an awfully long rappel," Obi-Wan pointed out doubtfully, measuring the cliff face with his eyes. "At least half a kilometer. And we wouldn't know where to start -- Kirlan said the mountains run 10 kilometers back from the cliff face."

"Then there's only one approach left," Anakin said. "If we can't fly or rappel, we'll have to swim."

"I was afraid you were going to say that," Obi-Wan said. "Let's go see what Kirlan says."

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Kirlan Swens's response was pretty much what Obi-Wan had expected. "You two," he declared, "must be insane."

"That goes without saying," Anakin agreed. "But is it possible?"

"Not a chance," Kirlan said, gesturing them to the table. "Trissa, can you get us some misti?"

"Sure," his wife said, crossing over to the simmering urn. "You children, go work on your chores."

"Aw, Mom," 10-year-old Kit protested. "Can't we stay and listen?"

"We won't interrupt," his younger sister Zizzy added. "We promise."

"Off, both of you," Trissa said firmly. "This is grownup talk. Maybe later you can spend some more time with our guests."

Silently, clearly under protest, the children left. "First problem's the current," Kirlan said, turning back to the Jedi. "You'd need a high-speed dive boat to make any headway, only I doubt a dive boat would have enough room to submerge in that maze of boulders where the river comes out."

"What about going in from the upstream direction?" Obi-Wan asked.

Kirlan shook his head. "The entrance to the gorge is even narrower than the exit. I don't know of any dive boat that would fit in there."

"How about a regular boat?" Anakin asked.

"They're bound to spot anything on the surface," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Could we climb our way in from the upstream end? Say, halfway up the cliffs where they might not have any sensors placed?"

"You could try rappelling," Trissa suggested as she brought a fresh pitcher of misti to the table.

"They'll be watching for intruders coming in from above," Obi-Wan told her.

"I didn't mean that kind of rappelling," Trissa said. "I meant the underwater type."

Obi-Wan blinked. "Excuse me?"

"It was something my friends and I used to do when we were younger," she explained. "You fasten a cable above the entrance to the gorge, then hold on and slide along it, letting the river current carry you downstream."

Kirlan looked at her, his mouth hanging slightly open. "Your mother told me you'd been a wild child," he said. "But that's just nuts."

"Remind me to tell you sometime about Anakin's career in Podracing," Obi-Wan said dryly. "Trissa, can this be done completely underwater, or is the river too shallow at that point?"

"We never submerged completely," Trissa said, frowning in concentration. "At least, not on purpose. But as long as we stayed in the middle of the channel, I don't remember the rocks being a problem. I think you could get far enough underwater to be hidden and still be safe. Of course, you'd need some kind of breather equipment."

"Those we've got," Obi-Wan told her. "What do you think, Anakin?"

The younger man shrugged. "If it was easy, everyone would do it," he said.

"Let's go see how much cable we've got with us."

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The river was a narrow torrent of foam and spray cutting through a groove in the mountains as it raced toward the taller line of cliffs ahead and the valley beyond them. "We usually started further downstream, right at the beginning of the cliffs," Trissa said, her voice barely audible over the noise. "I don't know any good places to attach your cables up here."

"We'll find something," Obi-Wan assured her, looking around. It would indeed have been simpler to start at the gorge itself, but the Separatists would have sensors planted there to watch for intruders. Here, a couple of turnings upstream, they could hopefully get far enough underwater to slip in unnoticed.

"How about that?" Anakin asked, pointing to a short but thick-trunked tree growing between two large boulders on the far side. Without waiting for an answer, he did a Jedi leap over the roiling water to land beside it. He gave the trunk a couple of experimental tugs, then turned and nodded.

Obi-Wan nodded back. "Looks like we're set," he told Kirlan and Trissa. "Thanks for your help. And thank Pickers again from us for letting you borrow his landspeeder."

"Sure." Kirlan looked down at the river. "Do you want us to wait for you someplace?"

"No, just go home," Obi-Wan said. "We'll let you know if and when we need a pick up."

"All right," Kirlan said. "Good luck." Turning, he started picking his way through the boulders back toward where they'd left the landspeeder. Trissa lingered for one last look at Obi-Wan, then nodded silently and followed her husband.

Obi-Wan watched until they were out of sight. Then, stretching out to the Force, he leaped over the river to where Anakin had just finished fastening his line around the tree. "Trissa doesn't seem happy about this," the younger man commented.

"She was pretty angry with her husband for bringing me to her home after I got shot down," Obi-Wan explained as he pulled out some cord from his cable dispenser. "She was polite enough about it, but it was obvious. I think she's working through some guilt over that."

"Well, I sure wouldn't want to risk my family for a stranger," Anakin said darkly. "I mean...if I had a family."

Obi-Wan's throat tightened as he felt the ache in his Padawan's heart. It was two years after his mother's death, yet her absence was still as fresh as the day Anakin had lost her. Someday, he would have to get the young man to tell him the whole story of that incident.

"That water's not going to get any warmer," Anakin pointed out, and Obi-Wan could sense him pushing the pain away into the back of his mind.

"Right," Obi-Wan said, checking his line and then Anakin's. The tree they were using had broad purple leaves; pinching off a handful of them, he stuffed them into his tunic.

"What's that for?" Anakin asked.

"You'll see," Obi-Wan told him, pulling his Aquata A99 breather from its pouch with a twinge of painful memories of his own. The breather would always remind him of that mission to Naboo, and the loss of his Master Qui-Gon...

He shook the thoughts away. "Watch out for sensors," he said and set the breather between his teeth. Getting a grip on his cable dispenser, he waded into the river.

He'd made it only knee-deep before a sudden surge in the flow knocked his feet out from under him. He toppled backward, but Anakin was ready and caught him in a steadying Force grip. Regaining his balance, he played out the cable and lowered himself the rest of the way.

Once, a long time ago, he'd been caught in the open during one of the sudden monsoon rainstorms of Matarri, where huge drops driven by strong downdraft winds came down with enough force to bruise the skin and occasionally even kill small animals. This was very much the same sensation, except that instead of lukewarm tropical rain, the water here was mind-numbingly cold. It pounded his head and shoulders, tearing at his hair and tunic, buffeting against him and trying to twist his head sideways as he moved deeper into the stream.

Half-a-meter below the surface, thankfully, most of the turbulence was gone. But the current was, if anything, even stronger. Instead of a rainstorm, he now felt as if he was being dragged through a lake by an angry acklay running at full speed. Bowing his head slightly to try to see past his feet, wincing as the shift in posture funneled a torrent of the icy water straight down the back of his neck, he started downstream.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something large ease past him. It was Anakin; but unlike Obi-Wan's more cautious feet-first approach, his Padawan had turned himself around and was heading face-first down the river, his cable dispenser held tightly against his chest, the line caught in a loose grip between his boots for stability. He looked at Obi-Wan as he passed, his face crinkling with a brief grin behind his breather, and continued on. Mentally shaking his head, hoping the other didn't brain himself against a rock, Obi-Wan followed.

They had cleared their second curve when he felt Anakin's warning flash into his mind. *Stop!*

He sent an acknowledgment and slowed to a cautious crawl. Anakin was waiting a short distance ahead, five meters back from a point where the sunlight streaming through the foam abruptly faded away, marking the entrance to the gorge. There, fastened to a boulder at the dividing line between light and gloom, was the small black disk of a visual scanner. Apparently, the Separatists weren't taking chances on even such an unlikely back door as this.

Unfortunately for them, their security setup hadn't taken Jedi into account. Getting a one-handed grip on his cable, Obi-Wan dug out the tree leaves he'd collected earlier. He held them up in front of Anakin's eyes, caught the other's flash of understanding, and let them go.

The current caught the leaves, sending them skittering down the channel. Stretching out to the Force, Obi-Wan guided their paths, running them around and past the scanner. Then, just as the second-to-last leaf was passing, he caught it in a Force grip, holding it quivering in front of the sensor as if its stem had been caught by a crack in the rocks.

Anakin was gone in an instant, sliding down his cable at typically reckless speed. Obi-Wan was right behind him, keeping the leaf in front of the scanner until they were safely past, then releasing it to shoot past him and disappear. Slowing to a safer speed, watching for more sensors, the two Jedi continued on.

With no idea where along the 10-kilometer length the Separatists had their base, Obi-Wan had had some concerns that he and Anakin would run out of either air or cable before they reached it. As it turned out, though, there was no need for worry. They had gone only a couple of kilometers when the current suddenly subsided to a manageable level, and a moment later, he spotted a forest of large pillars rising from the boulders at the bottom of the river at a point where the dim light from overhead went completely black. Tapping Anakin's shoulder, Obi-Wan gestured, and together they worked their way over to one of the pillars to their left.

They floated to the surface and found themselves a couple of meters below the edge of a permacrete platform spanning the entire width of the gorge. The pillar was too wide to get their arms around, but the steady hammering of the river had gouged handhold-sized pits in its surface, and with only a little trouble, they were able to climb up to the platform. Carefully, they eased their heads over the edge.

It was a Separatist research facility all right, exactly as Obi-Wan had expected. What he hadn't expected was that it would be this big. There were at least a dozen buildings perched on the permacrete slab, some of them the relatively compact size of research labs and power generators, others the larger droid storage and recharging facilities, and others were larger equipment storage or repair shops. One building near the center was definitely Neimoidian-style living quarters.

But it was a pair of extra-large buildings butting up against the opposite sides of the cavern that sent a shiver down his back, a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold water he'd been soaking in for the past hour. Each was three stories high with walls that were featureless except for wide doors at ground level and rows of small windows beneath the roof overhang.

Exactly the sort of buildings that might house major fabrication facilities.

"Whoa," Anakin murmured. "They've been busy, haven't they?"

"Indeed," Obi-Wan agreed grimly, returning his breather to its pouch. "You see just past the buildings, how the gorge narrows again? Looks to me like this whole section of cavern is artificial, carved out to give themselves more room."

"Makes the whole soggy trip worthwhile," Anakin said. He pointed to the buildings that had caught Obi-Wan's attention. "I vote we start with those big ones along the sides. They're pressed pretty close to the cavern walls, so there shouldn't be anyone wandering around back there to bother us, and those windows look big enough to get through."

"Assuming the builders bothered with windows on the side facing the wall," Obi-Wan said doubtfully.

"They did," Anakin assured him. "Those windows are mostly for ventilation, and the builders will have wanted to take advantage of the airflow along the wall."

Obi-Wan shrugged, peering upward. High overhead, though still protected by the walls of the gorge, he could see the black spots of STAPs on patrol. Just as well he and Anakin hadn't tried coming down that way. "One way to find out," he said. "Nice and quiet, now."

They dropped back into the surging water and worked their way to the left through the forest of supports. When Obi-Wan judged they'd gone far enough, he carved a set of hand- and footholds in the rock with his lightsaber and climbed up beneath the platform. Alert for signs of danger, he carefully sliced a large hole through the permacrete, using the Force to lower the plug into the water. There were no Neimoidians or droids visible when he poked his head up, and a minute later, he and Anakin were standing in the narrow gap between the building and the cavern wall.

Anakin had been right: The windows they'd seen were indeed repeated on this side -- and many were open for ventilation. Tucking his lightsaber into his belt, he made a Force-assisted jump up to one of the open windows, grabbing the edge with hooked fingertips. Pulling himself up, he peered inside.

He had expected to find a building filled to the ceiling with the heavy-duty fabrication machinery. To his surprise, the building was largely empty with most of its research equipment pushed back around the edges with only a meter of ventilation space between the walls and the various consoles. A dozen Neimoidians were gathered around a large mat lying in the center of the floor, while a number of worker droids worked at various assembly tables that had been set up just inside the ring of consoles. A maze of crane tracks crisscrossed the ceiling, and a service catwalk ran around the entire interior beneath the line of windows. After pulling himself through the window, Obi-Wan dropped flat onto the catwalk and eased his way to the edge.

He was studying the layout below when Anakin crawled in to join him. "I give up," the other murmured. "What is this place?"

"No idea," Obi-Wan said. "The equipment around the edges makes it look like a research lab. But why they're not using the middle of the floor, I don't know."

"Maybe whatever they've been working on is out of the building right now?" Anakin suggested. "That big mat could be what it was resting on."

"Then why does everyone seem so interested in the mat itself?" Obi-Wan countered.

"Good point," Anakin said. "Want me to go ask them?"

"Let's try to be a bit more subtle than that, shall we?" Obi-Wan said as he studied the room below. "Maybe start by pulling the records off that R-408 computer down there. I wish we had a droid with us."

"Maybe we do," Anakin said, pointing toward the right. "Isn't that the R3 from your scout ship?"

Obi-Wan blinked in surprise. It was Arthree, all right, strapped to a tall equipment rack and hooked up to a decryption analyzer. "I should have guessed they'd bring it here from the wreckage," he said, studying the room's layout more closely. At the moment, the droid was out of the immediate line of sight of the Neimoidians gathered in the center. If he could get down from the catwalk without being seen and get behind the analyzer, he should be able to free the droid without raising the alarm. Once that was accomplished, they could move through the ventilation corridor behind the consoles and get to the R-408. "Wait here," he told Anakin, starting to gather his feet under him.

"No, I'll go," Anakin said. Before Obi-Wan could object, he grabbed the edge of the catwalk, flipped over the side, and dropped silently to the floor below. Ducking behind the nearest cabinet, he hunkered down and headed toward Arthree.

Obi-Wan shifted his attention back to the Neimoidians, still working on the mats. But even as he watched, one of them straightened up and started walking with exaggerated casualness toward one of the nearby consoles. Apparently, Anakin's drop to the floor hadn't been as secretive as they'd hoped.

He grimaced, but there was nothing for it. Pulling out his cable dispenser, he extruded a few meters and attached a grappling hook to the end, then threw the hook to catch on one of the ceiling cranes. Pulling out his lightsaber, he swung down toward the Neimoidians below.

The one who'd been heading toward the line of consoles gave a throaty yelp and broke into a run. Still in midair, Obi-Wan locked his lightsaber on and hurled it ahead of the alien. It sliced through the three closest racks, sending up a spray of sparks and bringing the Neimoidian to a sudden panic halt. "Everyone stay where you are," Obi-Wan ordered as he hit the floor, stretching out with the Force to call his lightsaber back to his hand.

The command was superfluous. Aside from turning to face him, the rest of the Neimoidians were still right where they'd been standing when he'd started down from the catwalk, clustered nervously around the far end of the mat.

Which, in Obi-Wan's experience, wasn't like Neimoidians at all. They should have been running like frightened neeks, scattering toward exits, alarm buttons, or likely places to hide. Lightsaber ready, senses alert for trouble, he started toward them. He reached the edge of the mat, noting an odd sense of anticipation in the air, and started to take another step.

And without warning, the mat's upper surface suddenly split open along its diagonals and 100 small objects burst out.

He wrenched his foot back from its intended landing spot, shoving hard off the floor with his other foot to leap half a meter backward as a group of flying disks spun around in formation and shot through the air straight at him. His lightsaber slashed, slicing across them -- with a multiple concussion, they exploded into a blistering rain of shrapnel.

His Jedi reflexes were all that saved him, sending him ducking away so that the flying bits of metal perforated a fiery path across his shoulder and back instead of his face and throat. Suppressing the pain, he twisted back around to find another group of the disks spinning toward him. Catching them in a Force grip, he threw them hard toward the far end of the building.

There was a warning flicker from the Force, and he looked down to find a dozen small rectangular droids skittering toward him on tiny legs. He slashed with his lightsaber, dodging around out of their reach as he winced in anticipation of more explosions. But there were no blasts from this type. Instead, pools of evil-looking green liquid spurted from each as he cut it open, and the room began to fill with the hissing and pungent fumes of acid as it ate its way into the permacrete and metal of the floor.

"Watch out!" Anakin's voice shouted from behind him.

He looked up from the acid droids to find a double squadron of small spheres with short glider wings shooting toward him. Ducking to the side, he threw himself into a flat roll that brought him up onto one knee. The spheres changed course back toward him, and he slashed into the first with his lightsaber.

Obi-Wan gasped as the droid burst into a brilliant electrical discharge and sent a flash of current arcing into his arms and down his side, spasming his muscles and enveloping him briefly in a coronal haze. The other spheres were still coming; clenching his teeth, trying desperately to unknot his muscles, he swung his lightsaber up to meet them.

Even as Obi-Wan realized that he would never make it in time, there was a shout from behind him and Anakin leaped to the attack, his own lightsaber slashing back and forth among the spheres as he soared through their midst. By the time his feet hit the deck again, half the spheres were smoking pieces of rubble scattered on the deck. Ducking beneath the rest of them, Anakin stretched out his hand and sent them tumbling away.

"Thanks," Obi-Wan managed, fighting to unknot his muscles.

"No problem," Anakin said, pointing across the room. The Neimoidians were finally on the run, charging for all they were worth toward the exits. "Do we care if our friends leave?"

"No, let them go," Obi-Wan puffed, his knees shaking with the aftermath of the electrical attack. "You got the tech data download, didn't you?"

"Arthree's pulling it out now," Anakin assured him, nodding toward one of the corners of the room. "Looks like our other friends are regrouping."

Obi-Wan turned in that direction. The disk-shaped explosive droids he'd scattered earlier had gathered together in the corner, hovering in loose formation as if deciding how exactly to structure their next attack. "So are your shockers," he said, nodding to another corner where the winged spheres Anakin had dispersed had also congregated. The worker droids, he noted peripherally, had retreated to the ventilation corridor behind the rows of consoles, clearly wanting no part of this. "Looks like they're planning something."

"They're way too small to have that kind of intelligence," Anakin argued. "There must be someone or something else controlling them."

"Probably something in the mat itself," Obi-Wan suggested. "I thought I saw a glint of wires as it opened."

"Well, whatever's running them, let's get rid of them," Anakin said. "Uh-oh...."

"What?" Obi-Wan asked, stretching out toward the disks with the Force. To his surprise and consternation, he couldn't seem to get a good grip on any of them.

"They're vibrating," Anakin said. "Variable frequency, variable intensity. They're not going to be easy to -- watch out!"

Obi-Wan dropped his gaze, his lightsaber swinging downward in his hands at the urgent prompting of the Force. Just in time, too; with his attention distracted by the hovering droids across the room, a half dozen of the acid droids had managed to sneak up on him. Even as the tip of his lightsaber blade sliced into the permacrete floor, the droid in the lead spat a narrow stream of green liquid at his torso. It hit the lightsaber blade and bounced back in a fan-shaped spray that washed over three of the others, sending them scurrying away in a flurry of hissing and burning outer shells.

Before any of the others could react, Anakin stretched out with the Force and flipped them over onto their backs, swiveling them to point their sprayers in a safe direction. "Cute," the younger man grunted as their short legs flailed around.

"That's okay," Obi-Wan told him grimly. "We can be cute, too. You think you can get a grip on one of those exploding disks for me?"

Anakin frowned in concentration. "Let me see...yes, got it."

"Then get ready," Obi-Wan told him. Getting one of the acid droids in a Force grip, he hurled it across the room toward the flying spheres.

It took the control system perhaps half a second to catch on -- but that half-second was all it had. Even as the flying spheres broke formation and started to disperse, Anakin yanked his explosive droid out of the disk formation and hurled it on a collision course with Obi-Wan's acid droid.

Their paths intersected just in front of the scattering spheres, and with a flash of fire, the spheres were suddenly enveloped in a cloud of green acid. Even before the sound of the blast faded away, Obi-Wan and Anakin caught up the remaining acid droids and began hurling them like an interceptor missile spread at the remaining explosive disks.

The disks dodged frantically, but the droids were coming at them too quickly and there simply wasn't enough maneuvering space in their corner. Two more collisions, two more explosions of green smoke, and the battle was over.

"Well, that was fun," Anakin said. "You okay?"

"I think so," Obi-Wan said, eyeing the last of the smoking electrical droids as it settled unsteadily to the floor and lay still. Closing down his lightsaber, he wiggled his fingers experimentally. The numbness was nearly gone, though the shrapnel injuries across his back would require a healing trance somewhere down the road. "I'll be fine."

"Good," Anakin said. "Rule number one: Try not to be grounded when a high-voltage capacitor weapon zaps you."

"I'll try to remember that," Obi-Wan said dryly.

"Rule number two," Anakin went on, his voice suddenly tight as he held up his right hand. "Don't have an artificial hand when you do it."

A hand, Obi-Wan saw, that was visibly trembling. "Can you still fight with it?" he asked.

Anakin shrugged. "It's not too bad, but I may not be up to taking on a full garrison of battle droids." He walked over to the ripped mat, stepping carefully around the still sizzling pits in the permacrete. "Nice little booby-trap they've come up with."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, studying it carefully. There was a thin base layer of machinery inside, but aside from that the thing looked pretty light -- and waterproof, perhaps?

"Go get Arthree," he told Anakin, glancing around the room. His eyes fell on a group of three equipment racks, each of them over a meter wide and deep, and a good two meters tall, and he crossed over to it. Igniting his lightsaber, he sliced away the shelf supports, releasing the equipment boxes to crash onto the floor in a tangle of cables and power lines.

Lifting the three racks, Obi-Wan carried them back to the empty mat, laying them together on their sides in the center of the material. By the time Anakin returned with Arthree, he had the edges of the mat pulled tightly up around the sides, hooking the material in place on the mounting pins.

"This looks interesting," Anakin commented, eying the contraption. "I hope you don't think they're just going to let us float our way out of here."

"I'm hoping they'll have bigger things to worry about by then," Obi-Wan assured him, pulling out his lightsaber again and digging into the floor. "Put Arthree aboard and get ready."

He finished cutting their exit hole, letting the slab of permacrete drop into the surging river below. Together, he and Anakin lifted the makeshift boat over the opening and let it carefully down. Anakin, he noted with silent approval, had fastened a line to one end of the boat, which he now tethered to the upstream edge of the opening with his grapple. Gripping the edges of the hole, the two Jedi lowered themselves down.

To Obi-Wan's relief, his contraption did indeed float. "We're just going to ride the current?" Anakin shouted over the noise, squinting as the waves threw spray off the support pillars on either side.

"Yes, with a little troublemaking along the way," Obi-Wan said. Igniting his lightsaber, he slashed the blade at an angle across the nearest pillar. With a grinding thud, the top part of the column slid partially past the lower section, pulling a series of hairline cracks in the platform where the sudden dead weight now dragged at it.

"Ah," Anakin said, nodding his understanding. "Like you said, bigger things for them to worry about." He sliced through the pillar on the opposite side of the boat, then reached over and cut their anchor line.

The boat took off, bucking along the waves like a sprinting animal. The two Jedi kept busy, cutting every pillar within reach as they went. Ahead, the far edge of the platform loomed, and they shot out into the open area of

the gorge to find a dozen battle droids on STAPs hovering in wait. Spotting the boat, they swiveled to face it and opened fire.

Obi-Wan stretched out with the Force, letting it guide his lightsaber as he deflected away the shots that came near. The boat passed beneath the sentry line, and he turned to keep his lightsaber between him and the droids as they spun around and gave chase. Keeping his weapon moving, deflecting the shots straight back at the STAPs wherever possible, he settled into his defense.

They'd gone perhaps another dozen meters when it suddenly penetrated his combat tunnel vision that Anakin wasn't using the standard Jedi technique of deflecting the droids' own weapons back against them. In fact, as Obi-Wan paused for a quick breather, he saw that his Padawan's deflected shots were instead going harmlessly back toward the base itself.

Was his artificial hand still malfunctioning? If so, they were about to be in serious trouble. A fresh cluster of STAPs had appeared over the base, far more than he could handle alone. "Anakin!" he shouted over the water's roar. "You're not hitting the droids!"

"I'm not aiming for the droids!" the other shouted back. "I'm aiming for that power generator at the edge of the base!"

Obi-Wan smiled tightly. He should have known. Settling back into combat mode, he started aiming his own deflected shots toward the generator.

The droid reinforcements were just clearing the edge of the base when the generator blew, throwing debris into the air and sending a concussion wave down the gorge that nearly knocked Obi-Wan out of the boat. Through the smoke, he caught a glimpse of a dozen STAPs plummeting out of control, while beneath them a broken section of the base's permacrete platform collapsed ponderously into the river.

And with their base disintegrating and their Neimoidian masters in imminent danger of drowning, the droids did indeed suddenly have bigger things to worry about than a pair of escaping Jedi. As a slight bend in the gorge cut off his view, Obi-Wan saw the surviving STAPs turn around and head back for rescue duty.

Odds were, they weren't going to be there in time.

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"They're called crawl-carriers," Anakin told Kirlan and Trissa when they were once again sitting around the kitchen table. "It's an experimental weapons- delivery system designed for anticity or antibase intrusion."

"So how is it better than a normal armored carrier?" Kirlan asked.

"Mainly because it can get its package a lot closer before it's spotted," Anakin said. "They travel very slowly when they detect sensor probes or nearby observers, and only pick up the pace when no one's looking. Throw in some camouflage, and they can be on your doorstep before you know it."

"It's not something you'd use in the middle of a battle," Obi-Wan added. "It's a long-term weapon you'd set moving days or even weeks before you plan to attack."

"Or you'd use it without any official attack at all," Kirlan growled. "Look at what it's carrying: antipersonnel explosives, building-collapsing acids, power grid- wrecking capacitors. It strikes me more as a terror weapon."

"You could be right," Obi-Wan conceded. "We haven't really seen that sort of thing from the Separatists, but they may be starting to think in new directions."

"It seems so incredible," Trissa murmured. "You think something like this could actually work?"

"It already has," Obi-Wan told her grimly. "One of these has to be what brought down my scout ship." He looked sideways at Anakin. "Which brings us to the bad news. According to the base's records, that particular carrier is still on the loose."

Trissa caught her breath. "You mean it's in our fields?"

"Yours or someone else's," Anakin said. "The carriers are autonomous, which means that the fact that their base is gone hasn't bothered it any. If it was fully charged, it could keep going for a long time."

"But you can find it, can't you?" Trissa asked anxiously.

"We'll certainly try," Obi-Wan said. "I'll take the scout ship up first thing in the morning and do a scan. But with all its shielding and camouflage, it's going to be pretty hard to spot."

"Plus the fact that all our motion sensors are designed to locate and react to things coming in at high speed," Anakin added. "Probably why they were experimenting with something this slow in the first place."

"It has to be making for Vale City," Kirlan rumbled. "That's the only population center nearby big enough to bother with."

"I agree," Obi-Wan said. "We need to find it before it gets there." He hesitated. "And then figure out how to stop it."

"Can't you call in reinforcements?" Trissa asked.

"We can call, but they may not answer," Anakin said. "There's a lot of action going on in this sector right now, and we're spread pretty thin. Sector Command may not be able to free up anyone."

"Especially when all that's at stake is a minor city on an even more minor planet?" Kirlan asked bluntly.

Obi-Wan grimaced but nodded. "Yes."

Kirlan nodded back. "Thanks for being honest. Okay, then. Can you destroy it?"

"I don't know," Obi-Wan had to admit. "They're programmed for threat analysis and response, which is why the one at the base opened when I approached it. Out there, with more potential targets than just me, the droids may very well scatter before Anakin and I can deal with all of them. We need a way to destroy the whole thing at once before that can happen."

"I have a question," Trissa said. "What happens if you attack it and don't destroy it, but it hasn't reached Vale yet?"

"Then it'll attack whatever it can find," Obi-Wan said quietly. "That means one or more of the homesteads."

"And they'll kill everyone there," Trissa murmured.

Obi-Wan nodded. "Yes." He paused, waiting for the inevitable accusations and recriminations because, ultimately, all of this was his fault. If he hadn't been flying low enough for the crawl-carrier to pick him off, or if he and Anakin had simply left with the rest of the survey team early this morning, none of this would be happening.

But to his mild surprise, the inevitable didn't happen. Kirlan and Trissa looked at each other with that silent communication he'd seen before in people who were very close; and with a microscopic nod from each, they turned to the two Jedi. "Then I guess we'll have to make sure that doesn't happen," Kirlan said firmly, getting to his feet. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" Obi-Wan asked as the other led the way out of the kitchen and down the hall. Kirlan didn't answer but merely walked to the living room and gestured inside. Obi-Wan stepped through the entryway and blinked. Sitting quietly on the chairs and couches were most of the same friends and neighbors Kirlan and Trissa had assembled the first night he'd been here. "I wondered who all the other people were," Anakin murmured from behind him.

"I didn't even notice," Obi-Wan confessed, studying their faces. The last time he'd faced this group, their predominant emotions had been fear and antagonism. The fear was still there, but now it was colored with determination and support. "What's going on?"

"I should think that was obvious," Hanco said. The same man, Obi-Wan remembered, who a few days ago had flatly accused him of bringing the war to Dagro. "Kirlan said you might need some help. That's us."

"I see," Obi-Wan said. "Don't take this the wrong way, but what changed your minds?"

Hanco grinned tightly. "You did," he said. "Kirlan gave you about the lowest job we've got, stripping crop stubble. And you did it. Not only that, but you did it without complaining." He raised his chin a little. "That makes you okay in my book."

"And besides," Kirlan added, "like you said, the war's already here. I guess it's time we did our part."

Anakin cleared his throat. "No disrespect or anything, but I'm not sure you're really equipped for this sort of fight."

"Whether we are or not, we can at least help with the first part of your problem," Kirlan said. "That crawl-carrier may be invisible to city folks who don't get out in the real world more than once a year, but it hasn't got a chance of hiding from people who know our fields as well as we do."

"And as to the rest of it, you might be surprised," Hanco said calmly. "Come on in and sit down. We've got some serious strategizing to do."

By the time the meeting broke up three hours later, they had the beginnings of a workable plan.

Two days later, when one of Hanco's daughters finally spotted the crawl-carrier, they were ready to move.

* * *

"There," Obi-Wan said, pointing out the harvester's cab at a section of stubble where a sargheet field had recently been harvested. "A little north of the center."

Beside him at the harvester's controls, Kirlan shook his head. "I'll take your word for it," he said. "I still can't see the blasted thing."

"Frankly, neither can I," Obi-Wan admitted, shifting his gaze to his right. Hanco's harvester was paralleling them a few meters away with Hanco hunched determinedly over the controls. Beyond it, Obi-Wan could see the tops of Hanco's house and barn, well within range of the carrier's attack droids if this didn't work. Probably one reason for the man's grim expression. "But Hanco's sure. That's good enough for me."

"Obi-Wan?" Anakin's voice came from his comlink. "We're ready."

"So are we," Obi-Wan confirmed. "Let's do it."

"Right."

Slipping the comlink back into his belt, Obi-Wan opened the side door of the cab. "Be sure to stay to the right, on the carrier's eastern edge," he reminded Kirlan. "And whatever you do, don't even look like you're going to run over it."

"Got it," Kirlan said, his voice tight. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Catching the edge of the doorframe, Obi-Wan swung himself out onto the top step. He shifted grip, turned, and climbed the rest of the way up onto the pile of crop stubble bulging over the side walls of the harvester's wide grain bin. He crossed to the left-hand side, wincing at the stubble's scratchiness as he waded through it. Ahead and to the left, rumbling southbound toward them on the other side of the harvested field, were two more harvesters with Pickers and Jurvi at their controls. Perched on the heaped stubble atop the nearest one -- Jurvi's -- was Anakin.

The four harvesters were nearing the camouflaged carrier now, Kirlan's and Hanco's on the eastern edge, the other two aiming to pass just to the west of it, and Obi-Wan found himself holding his breath. According to the base's records, the carrier had been out here a week and a half, and in that time it must surely have seen passing harvesters and concluded they weren't a threat.

The question was whether seeing four of them together would be perceived as somewhat less innocent. Obi-Wan could make out the carrier now, looking for all the world like a slightly raised section of harvested sargheet field. Gazing across its artificial stubble, he saw Anakin lean toward his harvester's cab window and say something, and Jurvi made a slight adjustment in their direction.

Still no reaction from the carrier. Reaching to his belt, Obi-Wan got a grip on his lightsaber and braced himself.

Right on cue, with the carrier barely five meters ahead, Pickers suddenly slowed his harvester, letting Jurvi's roll past it, then made a hard left turn to cut across in front of the crawl-carrier's northern edge. At the same time, Jurvi pushed his throttle to full speed, and Obi-Wan had to grab for a handhold as Kirlan did likewise with his harvester. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Hanco pull a mirror image of Pickers' maneuver, cutting behind Kirlan's harvester to run alongside the crawl-carrier's southern edge. With a precision that would have done a drill team proud, the harvesters braked to a stop, neatly surrounding the carrier on all four sides.

Even before they came to a halt, Obi-Wan had leaped down from the bin, landing beside Kirlan's harvester. Igniting his lightsaber, he made two quick slashes, slicing through the latches on the side of the bin.

And as he stretched to the Force and jumped sideways and backward out of the way, the side wall of the bin burst open, releasing the load of gravel that had been concealed beneath the camouflaging layer of crop stubble. His leap landed him beside Hanco's harvester; and as the roar of flowing rock filled the air, he slashed again, opening up Hanco's bin and adding its load of gravel to the flow. Leaping straight up out of the way, he caught the side of the bin and pulled himself up onto the cab, turning around to look.

It was an even more impressive sight than he'd expected. Already the gravel pouring in from four directions had covered most of the crawl-carrier with only a small area in the center still visible. Lifting his lightsaber, he watched the clear area closely, wondering if the carrier would have time to spring at least a couple of its attack droids.

But it didn't. The last bit of the war machine vanished beneath the gravel, and the pile grew deeper, until finally the roaring subsided and only the idling of the harvesters' engines remained.

"Everything's set," Obi-Wan said, climbing out of Anakin's starfighter and stepping over to where the Swens family waited. "An analysis team will be here tomorrow. They'll dig out the crawl-carrier and take it with them for study."

"Good luck to them," Kirlan said doubtfully. "The thing's pretty well flattened."

"These teams are used to looking at stuff that's crashed or been blown up," Anakin pointed out dryly. "Trust me; this'll be a walk in the park. What did General Bavis say about the bounty?"

"That's set, too," Obi-Wan confirmed.

"Bounty?" Trissa asked, frowning.

"There's a reward for discovering and turning in new Separatist equipment," Obi-Wan explained. "It should be more than enough to cover all the harvester catches Anakin and I wrecked, plus hauling the gravel back out of Hanco's field, plus hopefully enough left over to pay all of you back for the time you took off from your work schedules."

"Are you leaving us?" Zizzy asked, a note of protest in her voice.

"Yeah, can't you stay awhile?" Kit seconded.

"I'm sorry," Obi-Wan said, looking at the children. "Maybe someday we can come back. Right now, though, we have a war to fight." He looked back at Kirlan and Trissa. "And with luck," he added, "that task will keep all of us a long way from your world."

"We can hope so," Kirlan said, stretching out his hand to grip Obi-Wan's. "But if the war does come back to Dagro, you know who to call."

"We will," Obi-Wan said. "May the Force be with you."

"And may the Jedi be with us," Trissa added. "Always."